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# **Is Government Branding ‘Just Wall Paper’ or Does it Enhance Product Acceptance: Conceptualising Brand Influence in Social Marketing**

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## **Abstract**

Much of social marketing contains little marketing (Rothschild 1999). Arguably this is the root cause of why social marketing practitioners in government are confused about ‘what social marketing is, what social marketing is not’. We suggest that much of the confusion surrounding social marketing can be minimised by reminding practitioners involved in social change programs about the ‘product mix’ and the fundamental influence of branding in demarketing initiatives. We argue that government demarketing initiatives, which are typically aimed at reducing behaviours that consumers enjoy (e.g. drinking, speeding, gambling), will be influenced by the Australian government brand attributes and brand personality. This paper discusses preliminary findings which indicate that using a government brand in social marketing reduces consumers’ acceptance of the social marketing intervention. Drawing from this analysis, the paper outlines a revised social marketing research model. In proposing this model, the authors present two positive outcomes. First, a research direction to assist practitioners in making better *marketing* decisions; second, a starting point for future consumer research which will enable practitioners to actively manage Australian government brands and their influence in social marketing programs.

## **Demarketing Strategy**

Australian government agencies focused on demarketing initiatives can employ a range of strategies to reduce the consumption of products and services that negatively impact consumers health and well-being; social marketing is one such initiative (Wall 2007). Rothschild (1999) defines social marketing as an attempt to manage behaviour voluntarily and involves the offering of new products or benefits to the target market, which differentiates it from the force of law and education respectively. A “demarketing” strategy employs marketing techniques to deliberately reduce a consumer’s consumption behaviour (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard 1990). This type of strategy is different to typical marketing practice which focuses on increasing demand for products and services. Arguable a demarketing product mix requires addressing a greater consumer challenge. This is because government agencies are involved in a deliberate attempt to use marketing techniques to induce consumers to change behaviours and habits involving a product that they enjoy consuming – excessively. Harmful consumption contexts created through excessive consumption, place the consumer in situations in which different motives, both positive and negative, will potentially conflict with one another. For example, government programs focused on reducing excessive consumption of alcohol, fatty food, speed and gambling, attempt to engage consumers in choices that minimise their dissonance towards reducing consumption of products and services that provide enjoyment, excitement and entertainment in their lives.

Recently Andreasen (2002) has warned of social marketing’s lack of differentiation from other approaches which compete for funding and media coverage when trying to reduce consumers’ negative behaviours. Maibach (2002) and Andreasen (2002) have also highlighted the poor understanding of the difference between social marketing and other functions used to influence social issues which have a negative impact on the well-being of society. Typically in Australia, government agencies use advertising campaigns as a central element when designing demarketing social marketing programs. However, evidence from the published social marketing literature

suggests that advertising campaigns are not necessarily the most effective method to initiate and maintain behaviour change when dealing with complex behaviours. Furthermore, international reviews (see: Alcalay & Bell 2000; Price 2001) have found that, although social marketing has been effective in altering some behaviours, its overall effects were limited (Stead, Gordon, Angus & McDermott 2007). These findings should encourage social marketers to reassess how they use advertising in social marketing programs. We propose that the first step in this re-assessment is focusing on product strategy. Specifically we argue that government organisation using social marketing need to better understand the influence of the government *brand* on a consumer's acceptance or interest in a desired behaviour. This focus is important because brands may signal a product's position in a consumers mind and its credibility in the marketplace (Erdem & Swait 1998). The following sections present a preliminary analysis of consumers' perceptions of government agencies involvement in social change campaigns and their opinions of government branding. Before presenting these findings, a brief discussion of the method used in the study are outlined in the following section.

## **Method**

Exploratory focus groups have been used to inform the researchers understanding of government branding and other marketing practices. Two separate groups of young adults (n=10) participated in a two hour discussion about their experiences with government advertising with the aim of identifying contemporary thinking about the acceptance and/or rejection of government branding strategies in a social marketing campaign. Focus groups discussions have been useful in this exploratory phase of the study because it provided evidence from consumers about government's use of social marketing tools and techniques. Focus groups were therefore used, not just because they are an acceptable method widely used in consumer marketing research, but because they are useful for exploring contemporary topics and generating ideas (Hackley, 2003). This was important during the exploratory phase because only minimal empirical research has been conducted about the influence of branding and placement of government logos in social marketing campaigns. Further empirical research, such as quantitative surveys, would now valuable to explore the prevalence of these issues in Australian society. The following section now turns to a discussion of the research findings which outlines consumer perceptions of government branding in social marketing campaigns.

## **Does Branding have a Role in Social Marketing?**

From the commercial marketing context we know that brands are important mechanisms because they enable a direct valorization of the consumers' ability to create trust and to potentially affect shared meanings, which has the capacity for organisations to create something in common within the marketplace (Arvidsson 2005). Shared meaning, about a government product or service, is important because the public construction of 'truth' and 'utility' are important factors that contribute to establishing economic value of goods and services (Tarde 1902 cited in Arvidsson 2005). We note however, that only some conceptual work has been completed to date about how a consumer's exchange of value is influenced by a government brand and that only limited empirical work has reported strategies to develop brand equity when designing a social marketing program. The following discussion, based on exploratory focus group findings suggests that target audiences' interpretations of government brand signals are mixed, and at best, consumers are ambivalent about the inclusion of government logos and brands in social marketing. As the following focus group participant's comment illustrates: *I think there's less credibility with government brand[ing] because if you see this spot you might think of it. ... But first [you're] wondering why they do it. I think it is much better without a brand* (Focus group 1, 2006). Related to this discussion point in the focus group, another participant qualified: *... with things like drinking and stuff like that the Government plays your Mum; [they] always want you to do the right thing* (Focus group 1, 2006).

Typically government advertisements usually have some form of branding, but what is lacking in the social marketing literature is an assessment of these brands' attributes (Donovan & Henley 2003) and brand management in general (Ewing & Napoli 2005). In the marketing literature a brands attributes can be described by a consumer's perception of trustworthiness and credibility. This was certainly true for some focus group participants; as a young male participating in the study explained: *For me, I think I'd trust the ad more if I knew it was from the Government ... if it's from a company I think they are just trying to make themselves more socially responsible* (Focus group 2, 2006).

Developing a brand in the social marketing area is a complex and continuing process (Andreasen & Kotler 2003). It shares some characteristics with for-profit branding (like the need for clarity and consistency), but Laidler-Kylander, Quelch & Simonin (2007) identify some differences. These include a more complex set of stakeholders and roles. Social marketing is also open to more scrutiny by the public and a stronger need to justify investment into branding than for-profit organisations (Richie, Swami & Weinberg 1999). The focus group data suggests that there is a prevailing acceptance of government use of advertising and branding, especially in area of health and well-being. The following quote illustrates this point: *... I think it's good – I think it's part of being Government that you do cos there's so much stuff that they have to compete with in terms of ... advertising and trying to sell me things. It's not an advertisement that is trying to sell me something ... [it's] trying to make me think, or something like that* (Focus group 2, 2006). For some consumers however, it is not just good for government to practice social marketing, it is also expected as part of the Australian government's responsibility to citizens. As one focus group participant explained: *I think [Government is] expected to do it ... it's more like they're expected to tell me the risk* (Focus group 1, 2006). The above quote also indicates another interesting theme that emerged from the preliminary analysis of the focus group data; that Government brand presence does not necessarily engage consumers in an exchange of value. This is because some consumers see Government brands as “wall paper” in the background of a government message. For example, a focus group participant noted about social marketing campaigns targeting health that *“[b]eing Queensland Health, you're expecting it anyway. Alternatively, different participant did note however, that: “I'd notice... if those sort of ads stopped, I'd probably notice it for a week or so”* (Focus group 1, 2006).

Another challenge is that branding in social marketing can be viewed as creating unhealthy competition between organisations for funding and media attention. Yet branding is useful for differentiation and communicating objectives and missions (Andreasen & Kotler 2003). The literature also indicates that branding is essential in the activities of social organisations, especially when working with limited resources (Faircloth 2005; Kirby, Taylor, Freimuth & Parvanta 2001). Faircloth (2005) recommended that the branding of a non-commercial organisation could be favourably influenced by the personality and image of the brand and how familiar consumers are with the organisation. Brand competition from non-commercial organisations was evident in the mind of one focus group participant. He noted: *I was trying to think of the ones that I take on, or have more authority ... ads from ... health foundations or like non-profit organisations that are trying to stamp out obesity, or stamp out heart disease or something like that. So, information like that I would probably take under more consideration than Government* (Focus group 1, 2006).

The use of branding can generally have good outcomes and its value is now well established. Brand image can influence stakeholders' attitudes and actions in a favourable way (Ewing & Napoli 2005). As the above comment from a focus group participant illustrates, branding in government marketing can also be effective in building on the inherent trust in non-commercial organisations (Ewing & Napoli 2005). Therefore developing trust is generally treated as an important part of branding (Richie, Swami & Weinberg 1999) and should be part of the government's social marketing strategy as well. Governments are often involved in social marketing and will likely require that their brand logo (e.g. Queensland Health) be included in social marketing, along with

the campaign brand (Donovan & Henley 2003). However, it is important to keep in mind that government organisations can be viewed with scepticism. As the comment from a focus group participant indicated: *I'm very critical, [but] I feel pretty safe with the Government. I'd say some of my friends are probably a bit skeptical about what the Government [does] ... they just don't like Government, they've no real grounded reason; they just don't* (Focus group 2, 2006). Just because a consumer is cynical about government, does not mean that they will not be receptive to the message. Yet for some consumers the inclusion of a government logo could mean a reduction in source credibility (Perman & Henley 2003). This is because consumers are cynical about the government's motives for engaging in social marketing and see the government as 'playing politics'. Some focus group participant comments demonstrated this point, which is typified in the statement from one young male: *It probably also gives a message for me. Probably because they're doing it more for them. This is maybe a response ad or some kind of issue that they have* (Focus group 2, 2006).

Whilst some government agencies may have brand equity, this needs to be assessed to understand the effect it may have on the marketing efforts (Rothschild 2001). For example, Wall (2007) found that with regard to binge drinking, the government campaign suffered because of a lack of clarity in the messages the government was sending via its communications and legislation. Similarly, Perman and Henley (2003) studied an Australian Government anti-drug social marketing campaign and found similar results. That is, government is seen as an unreliable source in consumption situations where 'sin' products are marketed. This is because the links the audience make between the government sources and their demarketing messages seems inaccurate. This results in reduced credibility government source credibility (Perman & Henley 2003). Arguable government agencies are seen as complicit in the consumption of 'sin' products, because they also profit from the taxes generated from the sale of such products. From the commercial marketing literature we know that source credibility is a classic persuasion variable and that it can influence and determine consumers confidence in the information provided. Recent market research conducted for a Quit Smoking Campaign (Staddon Consulting 2005, p. 28) identified that consumers are more critical of government agencies using advertising and branding. The report summaries that the young women (aged 22-24) who participated in the focus groups held a predominant perception that the government is more interested in maintaining its revenue from tobacco taxes than in encouraging people to stop smoking. The following quote from a young woman quoted in the report illustrates this point: *They could ban smoking if they really wanted to, but they don't, so putting up a Stop Smoking Website to me is a bit contradictory and I think it is all about more money and more tax* (Staddon Consulting, 2005). On the other hand, when addressing problem behaviours in social marketing, government agencies are more accepted than profit-oriented companies. As one focus group participant noted: *I think it's that I'm more skeptical of companies trying to sell me something, whereas the Government is trying to do something good* (Focus group 1, 2006).

In a government social marketing context the use of branding needs to be assessed for its appropriateness and how it may impact on the effectiveness of the marketing effort. This seems especially appropriate for government campaigns, where the presence of government branding may reduce the influence and persuasion of the marketing message. Although government agencies strive to project a strong and positive identity, people's *perceptions* of the Australian government identity are critical. Thus government agencies need to manage their 'corporate image', because it is the overall impression that various stakeholders have of the government agency. Researchers in marketing have recognised the importance of the 'human need to simplify buying decisions by creating symbolic representations' (Stern, Zinkhan, and Jaju 2001, p. 201) and as result many studies of image research have been conducted. However this research has not extended to the social marketing arena. This is a critical oversight because the image key stakeholders have of a government agency (such as the EPA — Environmental Protection Authority) will influence their acceptance of any recommended conservation behaviour. The following section briefly overviews the rationale for including branding research in social marketing consumer research. To situate where

brand design and planning fits in social marketing planning, we draw upon the widely accepted Theory of Planned Behaviour (TpB) as guiding a framework (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Manstead, 2007).

### **A Revised Social Marketing Research Model**

Planning a social marketing program is based on understanding the required behaviour change. A well respected behavioural model used in social marketing to plan behaviour change is TpB—Theory of Planned Behaviour. TpB assumes that the independent variables (IVs) of: attitude towards the behaviour, social norms and perceived behavioural control will lead to the dependent variables (DVs) of intentions and behaviour change. However, from practice social marketers know this does not always happen. For example, research has identified that that most people have positive attitudes towards safe driving, yet they still speed. One explanation for this lack of consistency between the IVs and DVs is the role of government branding. It is widely accepted in the commercial marketing literature that brands signify meaning to consumers about the source. It is therefore important to explore variables that are common and natural to persuasion situations, such as source credibility, and how they impact consumers' interests and adoption of government demarketing strategies. Furthermore, the brand literature suggests that brand management requires more than studying brand signals (e.g. credibility, consistency, clarity) and should also involve managing consumer perception of brand personality (Venable, Rose, Bush & Gilbert 2005). To better understand the influence of branding in social marketing campaigns, practitioners also need to appreciate the brand personality being projected, which influences the perception of that product. Self congruence theory (Aaker 1999) argues that consumers are more likely to adopt products where there is a “fit” between the personality of the brand and their own. Moreover, congruence between brand personality and the consumer influences the relationship that develops between the consumer and the brand (Govers & Schoormants 2005). This is a critical point in social marketing, because the problem behaviours being addressed typically require a long term commitment.

In response to better management of long-term relationships with consumers in the social marketing context, we argue that consumer research is required to better understand the influence of brand attributes and brand personality on consumers' adoption of the social marketing product. In response to this call, we propose a revised research model, based on TpB, as a critical focus when planning future social marketing programs within government (see Appendix 1). When social marketers have empirical evidence about the influence and persuasion of government brands on demarketing strategies they will be in a better position to examine the determinants of social marketing effectiveness. The contribution of this model highlights that consumer attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control may be influenced by the congruence between the government brand and their own personality. For example, what is the government brand “fit” between an illicit drug message and the illicit drug market when the government brand personality is authoritarian and conservative, and the potential target audience is an “at-risk-audience” of social drug users who are conceivably antiauthoritarian risk takers?

Rothschild (2001) has stated that social marketers were not concerned enough with branding in the past, and were more interested in telling people how to behave. In agreement with Rothschild, we recommend that government agencies use the revised research model as a starting point in their social marketing planning. In using this model, we believe that government social marketers will make better marketing decisions about whether to incorporate, or not, a government brand in their marketing strategy. Furthermore, we recommend that more research is needed to quantitatively test this model in different government social marketing initiatives that attempt to influence consumer behaviour involving products that harm the individual, and society through over consumption.

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## Appendix 1: A Revised Social Marketing Research Model

